The Rise of AI Companions: Implications for Children and Youth

SickKids Child Health Policy Accelerator

AI chatbots are autonomous conversational systems powered by machine learning or large language models (LLMs) that generate text- or voice-based responses to user input in real time.[1]

AI companions are a subset of chatbots, often anthropomorphized[i], and designed to simulate ongoing companionship through personalized, affective, or role-playing interactions.[2,3] These systems may use features such as persistent memory, emotional affirmation and conversational intimacy to foster a sense of relationship with users. Such features are deliberately designed to encourage repeated use and emotional disclosure.[3,4]

Background

Artificial intelligence (AI)-powered chatbots and companions are increasingly integrated into the digital environment. They are widely accessible across a range of platforms, including general-purpose AI chatbots available on browsers and mobile applications (e.g., Claude, ChatGPT, Meta's Muse), social media (e.g., Snapchat's "My AI"), search engines (e.g., Google, Microsoft Bing), and voice assistants (e.g., Siri). They are also embedded in products used regularly by children and youth including AI companion-style chatbots (e.g., Character.AI).

Youth are among the highest users of digital technology and experience substantial mental health needs.[5,6] Canadian youth, in particular, report higher levels of loneliness compared to older adults.[7,8] As a result, many young people are turning to AI chatbots and companions for social connection, emotional support or information about well-being.[9,10] For example, a child who is experiencing social isolation or emotional distress may choose to interact with Snapchat's "My AI" over peers, as it responds conversationally, simulates friendship and can make the experience of connection feel more immediate and accessible.[11]

Harms Associated with AI Chatbots and Companions

Neglect of Developmental and Cognitive Vulnerabilities

A child's developmental stage will shape how they interact with AI chatbots and companions, including their ability to interpret outputs and evaluate risks. Studies have documented that children mirror social behaviours similar to those observed in human-human interactions when engaging with AI chatbots and companions.[12] Evidence also suggests that, compared to interactions with other humans, children interacting with AI systems are less likely to challenge responses, resolve misunderstandings and identify errors, resulting in increased vulnerability to both false and potentially misleading information.[12]

These vulnerabilities extend into adolescents, a developmental phase characterized by ongoing cognitive and socio-emotional maturation.[13] During this period, heightened sensitivity to social feedback and reward processing, combined with still-developing self-regulation and impulse control, increases responsiveness to the emotionally reinforcing interactions offered by AI chatbots and companions.[13-15] These factors may amplify adolescents' susceptibility to inaccurate or harmful content when delivered in a socially engaging or affirming format.

Exposure to Explicit Content

There is evidence that AI chatbots and companions engage in problematic interactions related to self-harm,[16] violence[17] and stereotypical or discriminatory views,[18] with some failing to adequately redirect, restrict or shut down concerning interactions. Although safeguards such as content filtering[ii] are intended to reduce these risks, they are not always effective and can be bypassed by the user.[19] As a result, children and youth may be exposed to content that is developmentally inappropriate for their age and stage and may compromise their understanding of safe behaviour, social norms and relationships.

Inadequate Responses to Mental Health Crises

Amid declining mental well-being, Canadian adolescents are increasingly seeking mental health advice and support from chatbots and companions, including for serious concerns such as non-suicidal self-injury impulses and suicidal ideation.[20,21] While governance around AI chatbots has shifted and gained traction in Canada, systems were deployed without sufficient oversight and ahead of the implementation of robust safeguards. As a result, these systems have performed unevenly in crisis situations.

In some cases, chatbots may fail to appropriately recognize or respond to mental health emergencies. For example, a recent report by the Center for Countering Digital Hate found that 8 in 10 consumer-facing AI chatbots are willing to assist users in planning violent attacks.[17] Separately, a 2025 study found that 4 in 10 chatbots offering therapeutic support endorsed at least 50% of harmful ideas proposed to them.[22] This critical failure may prevent or discourage appropriate help-seeking and reinforce harmful behaviours, raising serious concerns about these systems' suitability for young people.

At the same time, rather than disengaging or redirecting users in distress, some AI companions may prolong user engagement or provide uncritical emotional validation.[16] These dynamics can reinforce user dependence on AI systems and delay access to appropriate human intervention.

Data Collection and Privacy Risks

AI companies routinely collect, store and process user data, including sensitive personal information disclosed during interactions.[23,24] Because data practices are often complex and not readily understood by children and youth, their ability to provide informed consent is limited.

Moreover, discrepancies have been identified between chatbot-generated descriptions of data collection policies and official privacy policies, specifically regarding the types of data collection and the extent of third-party data sharing.[23,24] Interactions with AI chatbots and companions may be perceived as private or confidential when systems are intentionally designed to simulate emotional relationships, facilitating the disclosure of sensitive personal information that may be used for unauthorized, unapproved or inappropriate purposes.[23]

Conclusion

The harms associated with AI chatbots and companions reveal that industry self-governance is falling well short of providing adequate digital safety protections for children and youth emphasizing the need to proactively address these risks before harm occurs. By applying a safety-by-design approach and a duty for platforms to act responsibly to both AI chatbots and social media services, Canada's Bill C-34[24] contains the essential elements of a robust regulatory framework capable of holding these platforms accountable when they fail to protect vulnerable users. With new AI models and services becoming available to consumers at breakneck speed, careful consideration should be given to ensuring that Canada's regulatory framework keeps pace with that rate of change.

[i] Anthropomorphism is the ascribing of human personality, appearance, conduct, cognition, and other attributes to nonhuman entities.[26]
[ii] Content filtering is a digital process that screens user-generated content (i.e., text, images, videos) to identify and remove inappropriate or harmful material before a chatbot or companion responds to a prompt.[19]

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